

## **Latvia**

### **Facts and Statistics**

**Location:** Eastern Europe, bordering the Baltic Sea, between Estonia and Lithuania

**Capital:** Riga

**Climate:** maritime; wet, moderate winters

**Population:** 2,259,810 (July 2007 est.)

**Ethnic Make-up:** Latvian 57.7%, Russian 29.6%, Belarusian 4.1%, Ukrainian 2.7%, Polish 2.5%, Lithuanian 1.4%, other 2% (2002)

**Religions:** Lutheran, Roman Catholic, Russian Orthodox

**Government:** parliamentary democracy

### **Language in Latvia**

The official language of Latvia is Latvian, which belongs to the Baltic language group of the Indo-European language family. Another notable language of Latvia is the nearly extinct Livonian language of Baltic-Finnic sub-branch of Uralic language family, which enjoys protection by law. The Latgalian language (a dialect of Latvian) is also protected by Latvian law as historical variation of Latvian language. Russian is by far the most widespread minority language.

### **Latvian People, Culture and Society**

#### **Religion**

At one time, Latvians ascribed to naturalist or what might be termed 'pagan' beliefs in natural deities. Although no longer practiced as a religion the tradition lives on in folk songs, legends and festivals.

Christianity arrived during the 12th and 13th centuries while the Russian Orthodox religion took hold in the 18th century. The effect religion had on the population greatly diminished during Communist occupation, when followers were harassed and discriminated against.

Today the constitution guarantees freedom of religion. There has been a religious resurgence since the fall of the Communist regime, with the majority of the population belonging to the Lutheran church, although there are also large Catholic and Orthodox Christian minorities.

#### **A Nation of Singers**

Latvia is called "the singing nation". It is unusual to find a Latvian who has not sung in a choir or some other group at some point in their life. Every few years all Latvia's choirs, as well as folk dance groups, gather together for the Song Festival, which includes several thousand singers.

Folk songs are one of Latvia's national treasures. The Latvian folk song ("*daina*") is one of the distinguishing features of Latvian culture. There are three essential elements of these folk songs: tradition, literature and symbolism. The *daina* is a form of oral art and is a symbol that has both shaped and epitomized Latvia's national identity for the last two centuries. Dating back well over a thousand years, more than 1.2 million texts and 30,000 melodies have been identified.

#### **The Family**

The family is still the centre of the social structure. Even in urban areas it is common for generations of extended family to live together in the same apartment. Most families have only one or two children. The family provides both emotional and financial support to its members. It is common for parents to provide financial assistance to adult children. In return, children are expected to take care of their elderly parents. It is uncommon to move from the area where you are born. Even if a child goes to a city to work, they tend to go home for holidays.

## **A Hierarchical Society**

Latvia is a hierarchical society. People are respected because of their age and position. Older people are viewed as wise and are granted respect. Latvians expect the most senior person, by age or position to make decisions that are in the best interest of the group.

## **Privacy Please**

Although friendly and informal with close friends and family, Latvians are reserved and formal when dealing with outsiders. They are private people and do not flaunt their possessions or readily display emotions. They believe that self-control is a behavior to be emulated. They do not ask personal questions and may not respond should you intrude on their privacy.

Personal life is kept separate from business. If a friendship develops at work and is carried into the personal arena, this camaraderie is not brought into the office. Personal matters are not discussed with friends.